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WASHINGTON — According to the Theory of Cognitive Dissonance propounded two decades ago by Prof. Leon Festinger, the human mind tries to block out information not consonant with previous beliefs or actions: For example, a recent purchaser of a Panasonic videotape recorder tries not to read ads for Sony Betamax.

Imagine the unwanted dissonance, then, jangling in the heads of people who want both (a) to eviscerate the C.I.A. and (b) to topple the Government of South Africa — when confronted with the fact that our C.I.A. was caught red-handed in the act of spying on South Africa."

The fact that we were spying is not really in dispute: The twin-engined Beechcraft turboprop used by the U.S. Embassy was secretly equipped with photographic gear and has probably been gathering intelligence for years.

The South Africans zapped us publicly — not so much for spying, as for hypocrisy. They have been conducting the sort of investigation that none of the African dictatorships would permit — into internal corruption — and we have reacted with great self-righteousness to their efforts to influence American media. So the South Africans are asking us to turn some of our moral outrage inward, and to apologize for using our hawk-eyed dove.

The Carter Administration reaction is to refuse to apologize (which is proper — sorry, Charlie, spying is spying) and to complain that South Africa is breaking spy-catching rules by going public (which is silly).

But then one of the pooh-poohers at State went too far in minimizing our operation: Shucks, the faceless spokesman argued, we don't really need pictures from the Ambassador's plane because we already have adequate aerial surveillance by satellite. That raised a good question: Why, when we have a KH-11 spy in the sky capable of reading license plates in the Kremlin, do we need a military attaché in goggles hanging out the bot-

ESSAY

Spying On Pretoria

By William Safire.

tom of a propeller plane taking snapshots with a Brownie?

The answer, provided by a person who knows a lot about aerial espionage, opens the way to a new chagrin: Central and Southern Africa, with little industrialization and much natural ground cover, is not the best area for exclusively high work. For observing troop movements, guerrilla activity and well-camouflaged atomic development, nothing beats systematic, tree-top-level surveillance by slow planes that can wander far from their official flight plans.

This implies that U.S. diplomatic aircraft have been snapping away in Angola, Botswana, Mozambique, Tanzania and Zambia, not to mention the Horn of Africa. This means, too, that the blundering "peace shuttles" of the State Department's Andy Young brigade — attempting to coerce black and white Rhodesians into handing power over to terrorist Marxists and undercutting the anti-Communist Savimbi forces in Angola who are fighting the Cuban-supported Neto regime — have not been a total loss. At least we have the pictures.

My own reaction is relief that the C.I.A. is still in business. Only last week, just before South Africa's public blast, Director of Central Intelligence Stansfield Turner went before the Sen-

ate Intelligence Committee in secret session to do the unthinkable: He left the Senators with the impression that he approved, for budget reasons, the delay of development of a new verification system to help counter our monitoring loss in Iran.

That session, at which the Director's demeanor was as angry and rattled as his position was surprising, caused three Senators (count 'em three) to call President Carter with strong complaints about his C.I.A. chief.

At such a time, with the Annapolis ring-knockers waffling at the helm, any news that the C.I.A. has operatives in the field, alive and kicking, is good news — even if they get caught and cause some temporary embarrassment. In spying's long run, it matters not if you win or lose — it's if you play the game.

I cannot fault South Africa's leaders — botha them — for blowing the whistle, or for exposing our continent-wide operation in a way to embarrass Mr. Carter's ambassadors with black leaders who hope to crush South Africa.

But Conservatives who understand the will of South Africans to defend the nation they built over three centuries, and who look forward to a Margaret Thatcher victory in Great Britain to abort the U.S.-U.K. policy now supporting the terrorists attacking Rhodesia — we're afflicted with cognitive dissonance, too.

Conservatives in both parties demanded a reassertion of America's human rights emphasis in the mid-70's, fought it with Kissinger and taught it to Carter. Certainly we have to encourage an end to apartheid in South Africa.

We're all of us, left and right, going to have to live with the cognitive dissonance that foreign policy irony demands. Spying is immoral but helps us build the strength to count for something in the world — and we can use that strength to enhance human freedom and to encourage the opening of societies on both left and right.